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ABSTRACT

Using resources gathered for the CRUMB (Curatorial Resource for Upstart Media Bliss) website(http://www.newmedia.sunderland.ac.uk/crumb/), this paper presents some key information and debates regarding the curating of new media art, both on the web and in conventional gallery spaces. Including quotes from Sarah Diamond, Steve Dietz, Peter Weibel, Benjamin Weil and Kathy Rae Huffman, the paper discusses issues of how artists are paid, how new media art is archived, how audiences might respond to new media art, and the aesthetics concerning the presentation of new media genres. Practical examples from the authors' experience of curating new media art are also given. (Contains 27 references.) (Author)

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# PAPERS
## Museums and the Web 2001

## A Curatorial Resource For Upstart Media Bliss

**Beryl Graham and Sarah Cook, University of Sunderland, UK**

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### Abstract

Using resources gathered for the CRUMB website (http://www.newmedia.sunderland.ac.uk/crumb/), this paper presents some key information and debates regarding the curating of new media art, both on the web and in conventional gallery spaces. Including quotes from Sarah Diamond, Steve Dietz, Peter Weibel, Benjamin Weil and Kathy Rae Huffman, the paper discusses issues of how artists are paid, how new media art is archived, how audiences might respond to new media art, and the aesthetics concerning the presentation of new media genres. Practical examples from the authors' experience of curating new media art are also given.

**Keywords:** new media art, curating, interactive art, net art, audience.

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Museums consider having web presence as obligatory -- as membership, information, e.commerce, etc. and then eventually an art space. The art space is not quite an afterthought, but it is not the prime focus.

*(Weil, Sins of Change 2000)*

... the Susan Collins artwork *Audio Zone* is spread around the exhibition space. The audience must wear infra-red headphones, which at certain points receive seductive voices urging you to 'touch' and 'stroke' the triggered video projections of nipples, lips and keyboard buttons. The desk staff who issue the headphones quickly noticed a very common misconception in the audience, and now carefully explain to each person that this is NOT 'a guide to the exhibition.'

*(Graham, 1994)*

The problem with curating new media art is that the fascinating range of challenges is matched only by the dearth of data and material available to help curators. Comparatively, the field of museum interpretative and educational new media is well resourced and debated. On seeing a piece of new technology in a gallery or museum, a member of the public is justifiably likely to assume that it is some kind of interpretative aid rather than an artwork in itself.

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General new media theory seems to be in plentiful supply; so much so, that the few accomplished new media artworks which manage to get produced tend to emerge staggering under the weight of eager academics. When it comes to the practical issues of presenting new media to the public, however, even Peter Weibel of ZKM admits that it is "difficult not to make an error because there is not much information ..." (Weibel, 2000). There have been some conferences and some skirmishing on discussion lists concerning new media art curating in particular, but nothing like the regular, archived, published events devoted to the web as interpretation.

It is this relative absence which the Curatorial Resource for Upstart Media Bliss attempts to address, starting with the collection and presentation of some pithy information and opinion relevant to overworked new media curators. CRUMB forages beneath the tables of education, museum evaluation and media theory for tasty morsels, as well as going straight to the horses' mouths of curators and artists for useful experience and hindsight. The website includes bibliographies, links, interviews with leading curators, and some useful nitty-gritty concerning contracts, etc. The CRUMB website, and this paper, draw from a wider research interest in new media curating at the University of Sunderland, and particularly from the experience of the curators. Working both in new media and mixed visual arts contexts, between us we have experience in working with budgets from £200 to £200,000, and in doing research in places from Banff and Minneapolis to Bangalore and Ljubljana. Having worked with institutions from artists-run centres to local authority galleries, we have sympathy with various devils, and can commiserate with Barbara London when she says that "It's tough to get museums to change, to keep moving in new directions. In early days of video we didn't have access-- parcel post is how they got around." (Sins of Change 2000).

It is very much early days for any discussion of new media art curatorship. At times the debate seems to move very fast, and at others it seems fossilized, with huge disparities in awareness and expectations. In Britain in 1997, the announcement of the Turner Prize nominees unleashed a surprising flood of popular press puzzlement that video could be considered to be art. On the other hand, in India, a healthily hybrid approach means that artists like Shilpa Gupta (http://members.tripod.com/shilpagupta/) can move between sculptural installation and Internet-based art fairly comfortably. The field of 'new', new-ish or upstart media is rather difficult to discuss when neither the terminology nor the genres are fixed. The conference *Computing Culture: Defining New Media Genres* (1998) suggested that artefacts could be considered within the genres of Database, Interface, Spatialization and Navigation. Festivals and institutions do seem to be starting to divide their calls for work into rough categories of Net.Art, Single Screen, Performative, and some variety of interactive or non-interactive Installation (Public Art and 2D Digital Images being occasional orbiting companions). Whilst net.art has netted the majority of debate and controversy, CRUMB also covers physical new media works in conventional gallery spaces.

This paper uses some resources from the CRUMB website to consider some current debates for curating new media art, falling under four headings: Artists, Archives, Audiences, and Aesthetics.

## Artists

> His idea was clear: a museum has to follow what artists are doing. Art history has to follow art. Not the opposite. Too much today the museum wants to prescribe what art is.
>
> *(Weibel ,2000, referring to Alfred H. Barr of MOMA)*
>
> Curatorial decisions are made through a need to justify hardware and software investments. Artists are a test case.
>
> *(Vuk Cosic, net.art pioneer, Sins of Change 2000)*

Art and science institutions have sometimes invited artists in to play with their equipment, only to find them fundamentally challenging their whole value systems:

> [new media art] practice challenges the notion of authorship, has to do with collective authorship; non western ideas of discourse is something the museum has always had trouble with. And what has happened on the net is a brain of a social collectivity, that allows discursive practice ... How do you support and preserve a critical practice that is inclusive ... how can you do that when it is difficult to pin down authorship?
>
> *(Sara Diamond, Banff Centre for the Arts, Sins of Change 2000)*

Artists, whether individually or collectively, have not only presented museums with major conceptual headaches, but also been implicated in major shifts in how educational and commercial research institutions think about what they do. As Lynn Hershman says: "digital artists have to adopt interdisciplinary ways of researching" (Sins of Change 2000), not least in order to get access to equipment. In the USA, for example, the Xerox PARC experience (Harris, 1999) openly explores the creative conflicts between art and science research, whilst in the UK the development of 'art-practice-led' PhDs has been involved with a fundamental questioning of 'what is research?' (Malins and Gray, 1999). It is the artists who make and push the new forms of media art, even if these forms are risky, challenging or an unfinished process: "... only the net allows us to make these works in progress. If you are a curator it is a crime not to use it." (Olia Lialina, net.art pioneer, Sins of Change 2000). Certain generous and brave curators have benefited from the spirit of this openness by making their research trips public (such as Barbara London's Japan journal http://media.moma.org/dot.jp/) or by sharing their process and knowledge (very notably, Steve Dietz's publications at http://www.yproductions.com/).

Concerning audience, archiving and economics, artists tend to ask the most difficult questions, such as Ester Robinson's queries: "Who is paying for what you are doing? ... Does it live in a place that no one should care about it? ...Who has ownership? ... How does it give the audience sustenance?" *(Sins of Change*, 2000). Of obvious importance to artists is the whole question of how they can make a living. Olia Lialina has stated that "My contribution to this discussion was the first net art gallery, Teleportica. It was to show that net artists are not the cheapest artists on the market." *(Sins of Change*, 2000). Should

museums be paying 'per screening' like video or cinema,? Should they be funding co-productions like films? How do web artists fit into the Exhibition Payment Right (UK) or CARFAC schedules (Canada)? Media artists can't survive

> ... unless museums start to pay artists fair amounts for linking to their work... amounts that are comparable with what any other artist showing in a gallery space in the museum would expect to receive for a whole body of work... one net site is usually not the equivalent to one painting ... more like a major body of work -- [such as] a large installation, a substantial video, a series of sculptures.
>
> *(Rackham, 2000)*

Other artists may see the more popular debate concerning payment and intellectual property as part of the commercialization of the Internet rather than as an art debate per se (but these may, of course, be artists with other sources of income):

> I'm always struck by how the mainstream press is obsessed with the question of how Internet artists are ever going to make a buck ... I recently plodded through stacks of reviews from the '60s of Fluxus artists smashing violins and pissing in buckets. At the time plenty of journalists asked 'Why is this art?' or 'Is it theater?' or 'Is it any good?', but I never saw a single article that raised the question of how these artists were going to make a living.
>
> *(Ippolito, 2000)*

The struggle for artists' access to money, resources and presentation facilities will no doubt continue, but as artists are the ones who are making the debate as well as the work, they may be "a test case" in a positive as well as a negative sense -- testing the institutions in unpredictable and productive ways.

## Archives

> How can we address the preservation of ideas as opposed to objects?
>
> *(Weil, 2000)*
>
> Lev Manovich: I understand your position regarding museums, art institutions, preserving, archiving, databasing -- but it's so different from the Futurists who said, 'shoot the painters, burn the museum.' Here we are -- the avant-garde -- and we want to keep all the stuff. (...) Maybe we should be looking towards the future.
>
> Sara Diamond: "It's different when a canon is being created, as opposed to a movement."
>
> *(Sins of Change 2000)*

It seems that every media art festival of the past year had a panel to address the question of archiving -- often as art (for example, the panel at ISEA2000 moderated by Karen O'Rourke with Patricia d'Isola, Christophe Le Francois, Eduardo Kac, Georges Legrady, and Lev Manovich), but also as a curatorial strategy. Yet despite all the discussions there remains an ambivalence toward the notion of archiving -- we don't know what to keep yet, but we need to be able to refer to it.

"We either let it decay online and that's fine or we preserve the memory and find a form to represent it in a manner that makes sense. Who in this room has seen the *Spiral Jetty*? But we all know about it, at least we have a sense of what the intent was. Going backwards to understand how this work was produced is a good lesson." (Weil, 2000).

> ... art critics have suddenly found pioneering figures in video installation, all from the early 90s. There is in fact a half-century of pioneers, and now we have to get the word out, not just the work out. ... the genesis of this conference was to address the amnesia of recent art critics. You must get up and think about them [the early media artists], teach them, write about them, make people watch them.
>
> *(Bruce Jenkins, film and video curator at Harvard University, Sins of Change 2000).*

Furthermore, we're aware that technologically, we're using media which have, in Bruce Sterling's words, "the life-span of a hamster" (1995). Showing the work in order to keep it alive, in order to make it part of a canon, is in fact destroying the work. In the case of film and video, the work is deteriorating as we watch and learn about it.

So, if we can't count on being able to keep the obsolescent technology, we need to be able to keep the intent, the words. Yet the question of archiving even the discourse which surrounds new media practice (which we anticipate will be useful to future curators) is itself debated. For every book published by MIT press, for example, there are a thousand e-mails on listservs across the globe that get read and deleted. Jennifer Crowe is constantly revising the guidelines for submissions of projects and information to the Rhizome database (http://www.rhizome.org). Then there's the question of whether the discourse exists in the first place:

> ... people in art worlds didn't know how to look at my work, or treat it. So I wrote my own reviews [under the pseudonym of] Prudence Juris. The reviews would talk about and argue about the work. Then I would take those articles and show them to the galleries to develop my own credibility. You have to create the language yourself to promote, historicize your work. Just doing the work isn't enough. You have to create preservation on your own.
>
> *(Lynn Hershman, artist, Sins of Change, 2000).*

E-mail has made even the museum tradition of filing correspondence with artists more complicated (few people in the museum world are consistently diligent enough to print and file a letter about the making or exhibiting of even a painting, let alone the details of a web commission).

The Walker and other museums have been questioning the feasibility of offering open source, shared server space to artists. Oliver Grau at the University of Humboldt in Berlin (http://www.arthist.hu-berlin.de) is developing a database of virtual art that documents not only the work of art but also all its different versions, each time it was presented, what the publicity/criticism of its exhibition was, even who the technicians who worked on it were. This is an academic (and highly theoretical) endeavour, but once online could be a model for the preservation of ideas as well as of the documentation of inherently transitory work.

This, after all, is the mandate of the ZKM. But on that front there is also the curatorial dilemma of the authority of authoring through the practice of archiving. How many future new media curators will see the exhibition *net_condition* produced by the ZKM as the official history of net.art? Why aren't Heath Bunting and Irational.org in the show?

> They [ZKM] had a show on Internet art -- I'd like this to go on the record -- very, very late in the game. They came very late to discover Internet art. They trailed on the coattails of other curators. They picked up and accumulated the choices of other curators. They accumulated them in their show.
>
> *(Huffman, 2000)*
>
> Sarah Cook: So then what is the future of a new media curator?
>
> Peter Weibel: to protect media art against the takeover of the historical art world. Seriously. It's not an easy job.
>
> Sarah Cook: But the historical art world is founded in part on museums where they collect art. That is why you have new media institutions like the one we're in now, ZKM, which also collects, so how is that protecting media art from the art world if museums the world over are collecting new media art?
>
> Weibel: By two things. First by emphasizing production, of contemporary, risky, young artists, and then by preserving the work which is discounted and marginalized by the art institutions.
>
> *(Weibel, 2000).*

In the field of new media art, the canons are beginning to appear amongst the hand -to-hand combat concerning archiving. Dust may continue to obscure the view for some time, but if we archive documents and records of the early exhibitions as well as recording the work itself, the history of new media may perhaps be usefully retained. By utilising the possibilities of new media, the archives may even be creative tools in their own right.

## Audience

> Who wants to walk around a gallery if it's full of toffee-nosed elitists?

*(James Bloom of Wired magazine at the First UK Internet Art Festival, quoted in Cavendish,1995, p. 23)*

> If interactive art simply mirrors the game -- its themes and values -- it becomes symptomatic of uncritical postmodernism where there is no difference between entertainment and art, where consumerism reigns. And when, loaded down as amusement, it knocks on the museum door, it insists on altering how and why museums function, further institutionalizing art as consumer fun. (Cornwell, 1933, p. 12)

In the early nineties, the utopian excitement about new and different audiences contrasted sharply with fears that the allure of 'hands-on technology fun' might be deeply implicated in the 'Disneyfication' of museums. Some time later, the debate is perhaps less polarized, but still rather contradictory. Shankar Barua (2000) summarised a situation that has international resonance: "In India the audience for art galleries is a thin elite. The audience for new media art is also an elite, but a different one."

Is the audience for net.art a new audience or just the regular art audience logging on when they should be doing something else? How does the audience find the site? How does the number of hits to a website relate to actual use, benefit and pleasure? Is it more about participation than audience anyway? And how about 'hacktivist' net.art, which may be deliberately anonymous and covert in its baiting of multinationals, rather than seeking an audience? For all the internationalist rhetoric, how does the Internet cope with the practicalities of cross-cultural art communication? For all of these questions, certain exhibitions and artefacts provide particular examples, but there is much less information available from curators and artists about behind-the-scenes data, illuminating failures, or audience feedback. Those who design museum interpretative sites have been gathering information for some time on those who use the sites, how and when. Artists may have very different parameters for judging the 'success' of their sites, but some data on who visit, and whether they stay for two seconds or two hours, might be useful, even if only to discover how best to shock and appall.

As for new media art installations displayed in conventional gallery and museum spaces, there are some scattered items of information concerning audience demographics. For example, for one exhibition of interactive installations in a regional British art museum, the show, when compared to other contemporary and historical art exhibitions in the same year, showed little difference in gender numbers, but a significantly higher proportion of visitors from the "under-20" age bracket (Graham, 1997, p. 102).

Gathering demographic information is one thing, but judging the subtleties of audience interaction is another. The entry of new media art into museums was very much spearheaded by 'the romance of interactivity':

> The word *interactive* sounds like it will alleviate the alienation of modern life by generating a dynamic alliance between artists and their audiences, joining them together in a splendid waltz that lets viewers become equal partners with artists in creating art (Wooster, 1991, p.

294). Since then, the romance has been tempered by some more critical views on exactly how interactive artefacts are: "For a multimedia program, a human audience is just a random number generator." (Cubitt, 1999) The knowledge of those designing educational exhibits has also become pertinent: "To interact is to act reciprocally, to act on each other. ... not merely a machine that the visitor operates ... 'Non-interactive mechanisms' perhaps sums them up adequately." (Miles, 1988, p.95). Although artists are understandably wary of 'audience evaluation', they may be interested in, for example, the results of Stevenson's (1994) research into hands-on science exhibits which indicates that there are significant impacts on the long-term memories and understanding of the audience, rather than merely a case of 'running around pushing things'.

Some of the commentary on the audience's use of interactive artworks in galleries has come from critics: "... you really need an hour alone with the thing, which is impossible under the circumstances of everyday museum attendance." (Coleman, 1994, p.14). Some has come from artists themselves, such as David Rokeby's detailed observations on "command" gestures versus "tentative questioning gestures" in his interactive art systems (1995, p. 148). Weinbren (1995) and Feingold (1995, p.401) have also made useful observations on 'control' and 'mastery' in their own artworks. Research into interactive artworks in galleries (Graham; 1997, 1999) expected interesting gender differences, but uncovered instead a surprising tendency for groups to want to use artworks together, even when this meant squashing uncomfortably into spaces designed for an individual. This led to a particular interest in artworks which encourage interaction between audience members, rather than solely between artwork and audience.

There is still a great deal of uncertainty amongst curators (and the audience) as to what *kind* of experience is being offered by new media art: Quick-fire game pleasure? Information pleasure? Sculptural pleasure? Sit-on-a-hard-chair-and-watch-a-video pleasure? (Graham, 2001). As with the *Audio Zone* artwork using infra-red headphones, this confusion may be used creatively, but the incredibly diverse range of expectations about new media art means that it's more than usually important to try to get some kind of feedback. Matthew Gansallo (2000), when interviewed about the Mongrel commission for the Tate (http://www.tate.org.uk/webart/), revealed a wide range of reactions:

> ... we got a lot of responses back: 'who did it?' and 'how scary!', and 'is this a site for knowledge?' and 'what is it?' and 'anyone can put this typically Tate shock tactics crap [up]!' And we got responses that were 'gosh this is interesting,' and 'I'm glad they've done this,' and 'it's good the Tate is large enough to say what you want.'

Whoever the target audience for new media art may be, and whatever the feedback, Robert Atkins has some pithy parting advice:

> "The Top Five strategies for overcoming sloth in your artistic/curatorial practice in relation to the issue of having your audience gain access to the work:
>
> 5. Don't think technological barriers will fall -- there are ever-increasing barriers of technology business ...

4. Focus your energy on technology that is beginning to arise, something not too far away ...

3. Don't lose sight of producers and of quality for audiences; the more you watch the less you know.

2. Do think hybrid, not just hardware or software. Digital culture can be simultaneously many things at once; producers and audiences can both be content creators ... The art-world mix of producers [can create] another form of knowledge -- from media into media art.

*(i.e. Muntadas' Archive Project and mediachannel.org)*

1. Don't censor yourself, don't wimp out, don't think anyone knows more than you do ... Find niche opportunities ..."

*(Robert Atkins, art historian, writer, media content producer, Sins of Change 2000)*

## Aesthetics

User experience is what art does best. To change the interface is to dramatically change the work.

*(Lee Manovich, artist and theorist, Sins of Change 2000)*

It's only under huge pressure that a visual arts curator would agree to hang a video projector, and only if it is agreed the projector will project an image on the wall and take us back to painting. Only under threat of torture will a visual arts curator put a computer in the galleries.

*(Philippe Verge, Walker Art Center , Sins of Change 2000)*

The aesthetics of new media art is easily ignored in favour of its function. Moreover, the way a piece of new media art looks and holds up within the realm of aesthetics is usually masked behind a whack of media and communication theory -- about networks, about spectacle, about invisible architectures. Aesthetics, as a philosophy, is an old-fashioned one, and certainly not one taught in most media schools. It is, however, a philosophy taught to curators. Hegel taught that to each age there is an art form, from painting to sculpture to the architecture of the temple itself; from this we learned not to see art as separate from the age in which it was produced. New media's very nature -- interactivity being one aspect -- has demanded of curators different criteria for the aesthetic evaluation of the works. Would Hegel have placed net.art as the highest art form for our age?

In his article "The Death of Computer Art", Lev Manovich (1996) made a distinction between two worlds where art is made and shown, but where the social definitions of art differ enormously. The first he called "Duchamp-land" and defined it as: "galleries, major museums, prestigious art journals"; the second he called "Turing-land" and defined its parameters as "ISEA, Ars Electronica, SIGGRAPH art shows, etc." Manovich's point was that the two worlds would not converge, that we

should not expect what is being made in Turing-land to be shown in Duchamp-land. The reason for this, he surmised, was that the typical object admitted to Duchamp-land prioritizes content and fits within a discourse of irony, self-referentiality and other things generally postmodern, but that the objects being made in Turing-land are not ironic because they are oriented towards ever-new technology rather than content, they are simple in ideas, and they take their technology very seriously.

This distinction is still valid. Manovich established criteria for the type of art *accepted* in each land, but what he didn't mention then, and what has become paramount now in 2001, are the criteria for art to be *shown* in each land-- namely, the questions of exhibition practices and the field of curatorship. For art to be shown in Turing-land, it need only apply. All that is needed is some money, a truck, a power-bar, a plug, a network connection plus a space in a fair in a convention center, or maybe none of that but ftp and a server. For art to be shown in Duchamp-land it has to have the interest of a curator, and with that comes the backing of an institution, a board of directors, a funding body, an intellectual mass. Unlike the art made in Turing-land, art in Duchamp-land goes through some process of curatorial legitimization before it is shown. Curators make regular visits to Turing-land in order to find things to bring to Duchamp-land (that's how Lev Manovich ended up in the Walker Art Center -- one of the powerhouses of Duchamp-land). So in that respect, it might have very little to do with what the work is actually about. While the two worlds may not have converged, the way curators move between them has had an effect on the work being produced in each. Where do you think curators have learned the communication theory behind which they can hide the lackluster aesthetics of much of new media art? What is found readymade in Turing-land can always be signed and exhibited in Duchamp-land.

And has this curatorial "research" had an effect on the way the work is presented in each? You betcha. Curators beware: 'changing interface' can change the work. One only has to think of the different experience of visiting a convention center from visiting a white cube to realize that the interface is the interaction. The same is the case on the web -- seeing art in the context of a commercial product-based site and seeing it in the context of a cultural content-based site can drastically affect how that work is interpreted.

The best recent example of this was Vivian Selbo's design for the exhibition *Art Entertainment Network* (http://aen.walkerart.org). Creating a customizable interface for the works on view was the artwork in itself. There was a place to shop, a place to read, a place to listen, a place to chat ... all things we expect from our web-experience, whether commercial or cultural. These types of interfaces are clearly needed as curators have recognized that Duchamp-land-type media art simply doesn't fly in any place where its irony and content-based form is subsumed by the pressures of the bottom line.

Though who says aesthetic culture isn't commercial anyway? Obviously it always has been. Nevertheless, the curating of media art into Duchamp-land has caused a number of Turing-land artists to reconsider how they want their work to evolve in the world. Why should it be self-referential and postmodern just to get the money to be shown in Duchamp-land when now they can get a lot more money by masking the irony and selling their skills to the market (which is neither Duchamp nor Turing aware) instead? As such, a number of web-based artists have

turned the lion's share of their attention away from simply making works of net.art to starting dot.coms: Vuk Cosic and the Slovenian start-up Literal (http://www.literal.si), the boys from etoy selling shares as art (http://www.etoy.com), hans_extrem and his self-professed very expensive consulting company, Ubermorgen (http://www.ubermorgen.com).

This has created a third problem and brings us back to the beginning of the vicious circle. How do curators present this type of overtly commercial and yet slyly Duchampian practice when museums structures have traditionally dictated that the art shown is not explicitly commercial, and when at the same time the commercial galleries won't touch new media art with a ten-foot pole because they can't see its inherent ephemerality as an investment? Should they even exhibit it? Until Turing-land and Duchamp-land (and now perhaps Monopoly-land) get themselves sorted out, the answer seems to be that curators tend to go back to their philosophies of aesthetics and mask the work behind more theory: beauty with seduction always sells.

## In Conclusion

The reason curators expose themselves to the confusion and challenge (and carping) of newmedia art might be that the whole mess is undeniably fascinating and offers opportunities for trying a bold experiment,and getting it right (or more right than anyone so far). CRUMB aims to provide some information which might help avoid the alternative of getting it spectacularly wrong (in a way that someone else has previously got it wrong). We aim to extend the life-span of the media art hamster by filling our cheeks with crumbs dropped by curators and others, and all thanks should go to those who share the knowledge (Steve Dietz and Sara Diamond particularly), and to all those who agreed to be interviewed about awkward subjects.

The Museums and the Web conference is one of the few occasions on which educators and archivists get to meet artists and art curators and to share information from their varied experience. We hope that people will contribute to the CRUMB site and discussion list, and add to the public body of knowledge concerning new media curating.

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